



# OPERATION ABSOLUTE RESOLVE

**Matthew Borie** examines the recent tension in the Caribbean between the US and Venezuela

**T**he already strained relations between the United States (US) and Venezuela deteriorated further in late 2025, particularly after the US began increasing its military presence in the Southern Caribbean Sea under the guise of counter-narcotics operations. The growing tension was the result of a broader US strategy aimed at dismantling transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) based in Latin America, alongside efforts to weaken the regime of President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. The evolving military situation resulted in kinetic strikes, non-kinetic operations and a naval blockade, all of which aimed to exert pressure on Venezuela's political and economic infrastructure. This article explores the tensions between the US and Venezuela, examining US

military operations in the Southern Caribbean Sea region since September, Venezuela's response and the US military's Operation Absolute Resolve, which resulted in the removal of President Maduro.

Since the beginning of Donald Trump's second term as US president in January 2025, the administration has taken a hardline approach to combat narcotics trafficking to the US. A widely recognised route for narcotics trafficking to the US is from South America, particularly Venezuela, via the Caribbean; this includes the illicit use of maritime vessels, typically 'go-fast' boats, to 'island hop' across the Caribbean. Light aircraft and business jets have also previously been involved in narcotics trafficking through the region. To counter this, the US significantly ramped up its military presence in the region, deploying air and naval assets to conduct further

operations targeting drug cartels and TCOs – part of the US Department of Defense's Operation Southern Spear, which launched on 1 September.

While narcotics interdictions in the region are not new, US military efforts evolved into direct action aimed at Venezuela itself. Also beginning in September 2025, the US military escalated its operations to include air patrols and a naval blockade designed to isolate Venezuela and apply pressure on the Maduro regime. Additionally, non-kinetic measures such as cyber attacks, electronic warfare (EW) and psychological operations have been deployed to further destabilise Venezuela's infrastructure and military capabilities.

The US military's strategy involved a mix of both kinetic and non-kinetic operations. Kinetic strikes, such as airstrikes against maritime targets linked to TCOs, have been a core component of this approach. These operations have taken place primarily in the Southern Caribbean Sea, where US forces have targeted alleged drug-smuggling vessels. Since September, the US has claimed conducting at least 10 kinetic strikes against TCO vessels in the southern Caribbean Sea and at least 18 similar strikes in the eastern Pacific Ocean. Additionally, in December, US drone strikes were reported to have hit TCO narcotics facilities along Venezuela's coastline, targeting key nodes in the illicit trade. On 4 January, the US secretary of state said: "The United States is not at war with Venezuela, but is fighting drug trafficking organisations. They will continue to face pressure from the United States. We will continue to target drug boats if they try to run towards the United States."

In addition to kinetic operations, the US increased its use of non-kinetic measures, such as cyber attacks and electronic warfare. These operations included efforts to disrupt Venezuela's military communication networks and its air-defence systems, with the goal of disabling Venezuela's ability to defend itself against military interventions. EW activities, including GPS jamming and spoofing, have been used to undermine Venezuela's maritime operations and reduce its military effectiveness in the region; however, this has also had a knock-on effect on civilian aviation operations.

Psychological operations have also played a role, with the US employing air, naval and air-defence deployments alongside public diplomatic messaging. The combined pressure aimed to destabilise the Maduro regime. Furthermore, harsh economic sanctions against Venezuela and Venezuelan-linked entities were introduced to exacerbate the regime's vulnerabilities.

In response to the growing US military presence and operations in the region, Venezuela responded by bolstering its own military preparedness. On 11 September, Maduro launched Independence Plan 200, a military operation aimed at comprehensive defence of the nation, particularly along the coast. Maduro also reportedly ordered the mass mobilisation of almost 200,000 military personnel – including land, air, naval and reserve forces – as well as the Bolivarian Militia to carry out military exercises through 12 November in response to the deployment of the US Navy Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group (CSG) to the US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) area of responsibility on 11 November.

Venezuelan officials made public statements signalling that the military was ready for combat. On 27 November, Venezuela's defence minister stated that the

country's military was prepared "to take to the skies for the defence and dignity of the homeland". This declaration reflected the Venezuelan government's determination to resist any foreign intervention and defend its sovereignty against perceived US aggression. Also on 27 November, Maduro ordered the Venezuelan military "to be alert, ready, and willing to defend Venezuela".

One of the most significant actions taken by the US military has been the implementation of a naval blockade aimed at crippling Venezuela's oil industry. On 16 December, President Trump announced a: "total and complete blockade" of all sanctioned Venezuelan oil tankers, seeking to prevent the export of oil from Venezuela to international markets. As of 27 January, the US military has seized at least seven oil tankers linked to Venezuela.

## INTERNAL DIVISIONS WITHIN THE REGIME COULD STILL POSE A THREAT TO STABILITY

Venezuela's oil sector is a key pillar of the country's economy, providing vital revenue to the government. The blockade has not only sought to cut off Venezuela's access to international oil markets, but also to deprive the regime of the funds necessary to sustain its military apparatus and political control. The US has coupled this naval blockade with sanctions targeting Venezuelan oil companies and state-owned entities, further isolating Venezuela economically.

The most dramatic escalation in US-Venezuela relations occurred on 3 January when President Trump claimed that the US military carried out "a large-scale strike against Venezuela and its leader, President Nicolás Maduro" and that Maduro and his wife had been "captured and flown out of the country". US officials later confirmed that a series of strikes had been carried out on Venezuela, including in the capital, Caracas. At least one US military helicopter was hit by unspecified Venezuelan air-defence system engagement over Caracas. This operation, which also temporarily disabled Venezuela's air-defence network, marked a pivotal moment in the ongoing US efforts to unseat the Maduro regime.

In the wake of Maduro's capture, Venezuela declared a nationwide state of emergency, which remains in effect as of 27 January. Acting President Delcy Rodríguez, who had been Maduro's vice president, assumed control of the country and the Venezuelan military was placed on high alert. Rodríguez's government has sought to stabilise the situation by reinforcing internal control, maintaining support from the military and seeking to restore diplomatic relations with the US.

The political fallout from Operation Absolute Resolve, notably Maduro's capture, has been significant. Despite the initial power vacuum following Maduro's removal, the remnants of the Maduro regime, including key figures in the defence and interior ministries, quickly consolidated power under Rodríguez's leadership. The opposition in Venezuela, however, lacks the political and military support

**In September 2025, the US military carried out air patrols to apply pressure on the Maduro regime**

necessary to challenge the existing regime, meaning that Rodríguez's leadership appears secure, at least in the short term.

On 9 January, the Venezuelan foreign ministry announced the start of an "exploratory process" to reestablish diplomatic relations with the US. This announcement followed the release of several political prisoners by the Venezuelan government, a move that was perceived as a sign of good faith by the US government. President Trump acknowledged this gesture in a Truth Social post, in which he also noted that he had called off a "second Wave of Attacks": "This is a very important and smart gesture. The USA and Venezuela are working well together, especially as it pertains to rebuilding, in a much bigger, better, and more modern form, their oil and gas infrastructure. Because of this cooperation, I have cancelled the previously expected second Wave of Attacks, which looks like it will not be needed, however, all ships will stay in place for safety and security purpose."

## TRUMP ANNOUNCED A: "TOTAL AND COMPLETE BLOCKADE" OF ALL VENEZUELAN OIL TANKERS

The US government, for its part, has stated it is not pressing for Venezuela to hold elections in the near term and has also not put its support behind the opposition to take power from the regime. Instead, on 7 January, the US secretary of state outlined a three-step process for Venezuela's future, which includes stabilisation, recovery and transition: "We have a three-fold process in Venezuela: step one is the stabilisation of the country. We are going to take between 30 and 50 million barrels of oil. We are going to sell it in the marketplace at market rates. We will

control how that money is dispersed. The second phase will be recovery, ensuring that American, Western and other countries have access to Venezuelan markets. The third phase will be one of transition."

As part of this process, the US is reportedly working with Rodríguez in three specific areas: expelling China, Cuba, Russia and Iran from Venezuela; exporting Venezuelan oil to the US for refining; and conducting counter-narcotics operations against drug trafficking groups.

Osprey assesses that the security situation in Venezuela remains fluid, and while some signs of de-escalation have emerged, such as the cancellation of a second wave of US military strikes and the beginning of diplomatic talks, the situation remains precarious. The US military is likely to continue its operations in the Caribbean, particularly targeting maritime narcotics trafficking, while maintaining pressure on Venezuela's oil sector through the blockade.

In Venezuela, the military leadership remains firmly in control, with the remnants of the Maduro regime consolidating power under Rodríguez. While the opposition remains fragmented and lacks the necessary support to seize power, internal divisions within the regime could still pose a threat to the stability of the government. The Venezuelan military continues to play a central role in shaping the country's future, and any significant internal dissent or foreign intervention could lead to a rapid shift in the balance of power.

For the time being, Osprey assesses that the US will likely maintain its focus on pressuring Venezuela economically and militarily. However, the outcome of this confrontation remains uncertain, with the potential for further escalation or a shift toward diplomatic normalisation depending on future developments. The situation in Venezuela will continue to have profound implications for regional stability, and the international community will be watching closely as the situation evolves ●

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**The US military will continue its operations in the Caribbean, particularly targeting maritime narcotics trafficking**

